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ABSTRACT

An initial model of the evaluation process in the leadership context is presented in order to consider information processing explanations of behavior in general and attributional analyses in particular. The model is designed to aid those individuals acting in supervisory capacities who must evaluate the performance of subordinates in an organizational setting. This model addresses the following areas of concern: effects of attribution; observational bias; informational factors; social relationship factors between leader and subordinate; and aspects of the task, such as difficulty, ability, and financial reward. Schematic diagrams of the model are also presented. (HLM)

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Leader Responses to Poor Performance: An Attributional Analysis

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Dealing with poor performance is a crucial problem in today's organizations. Tardiness, absenteeism, turnover, sabotage and lack of effort cause losses in the billions of dollars each year. In addition to this global analysis, poor performance has detrimental effects for the individual leader and employee. An inordinate amount of any manager's time is spent thinking about and dealing with the poor performer. It is an unpleasant part of any leader's job, and it is hard on the employee as well.

Unfortunately, we know very little about leaders' responses to a subordinate's poor performance, or how this response affects future performance. Numerous research studies have focused on the development of better performance measures. But these measures are designed simply to tell us when poor performance has occurred. What we need now is information about (a) how leaders diagnose poor performance and (b) what they do about it. The following paper investigates these two questions.

Leadership and Poor Performance: An Attributional Analysis

We are constantly involved in the evaluation of other people's behavior. It occurs in all of our interpersonal interactions. However, in the organizational setting this evaluation increases in its importance. It is the responsibility of leaders to not only evaluate performance but to do something about it. There is the clear charge that poor performance should be corrected and result in increased effectiveness. The important questions for the leader are, "Why did this poor performance occur?" and "What is my most appropriate response?" Thus, the inference about the cause of the poor

performance (e.g., laziness, lack of information) and the choice of an appropriate response (e.g., training, a reprimand) are the focus of this paper.

Attribution Theory

In the last twenty years, a body of psychological knowledge has developed under the label of attribution theory (Shaver, 1975). Attribution theory attempts to explain (a) how people make inferences about the causes of their own and other people's behavior and (b) how they act upon those inferences. Since these questions parallel the questions about a leader's reaction to poor performance, attribution theory serves as the foundation for our analysis.

The initial ideas for attribution theory can be traced to the work of Fritz Heider (Heider, 1944, 1958) who argued that all of us strive to understand the world around us, especially the behavior of others. An understanding of interpersonal behavior helps us to reduce uncertainty and increases the predictability, and hence our control, of other people's behavior. To do this, Heider argued, we develop and use rather naive theories of the causes of behavior.

Central to the theory developed by Heider were the questions of intention and of the personal and environmental causes of behavior. That is, the observer attempts to determine if the actor's behavior was intentional and whether the cause of the intended action was internal personal factors such as personality characteristics and abilities or external environmental factors such as social pressure or the demands of the task.

Out of this and subsequent work by people like Kelley (1971, 1973) and Jones and Davis (1965) came a number of interesting conclusions. There was general agreement that a systematic attributional process did indeed occur. People initially (a) observe action, (b) infer intentionality, (c) make attributions about the internal or external causes of the action, and (d) respond to the action in light of the attribution.

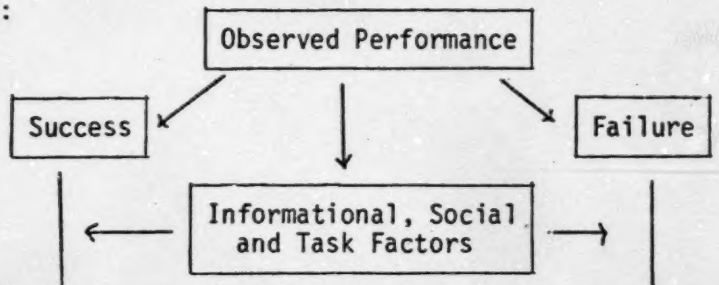
The internal/external issue. An important issue pertaining to a leader's evaluation of poor performance focuses upon whether the cause of the poor performance is seen as internal or external. If a leader believes that a subordinate has, for example, failed to meet a deadline and that the failure is due to lack of effort (an internal attribution), he is more likely to reprimand the subordinate than if he believes the failure was due to a computer breakdown (an external attribution). Internal attributions should result in the leader trying to change the behavior of the subordinate. External attributions should result in the leader trying to change the task or the surrounding environment.

Kelley's (1971, 1973) work is particularly useful in describing the information that is necessary for making internal or external attributions. He argues that the observer uses three kinds of information: distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus. Distinctiveness refers to a comparison between the subordonate's poor performance in this particular task compared to other tasks; the more distinctive, the more likely an external attribution. That is, when a subordinate fails on one task but does well on many others, the supervisor is likely to attribute the poor performance to external causes.

Consistency concerns how well the subordinate does on the same task over time. If the subordinate continues to fail at the task, the observer is

more likely to make an internal attribution. Finally, there is consensus: How do other people do? Does everyone fail at this task? The more consensus, the more likely an external attribution.

Research by Weiner et al. (1971) argues that there is a further distinction within the internal/external categories that is important. They suggest that there are stable and unstable factors within each of these categories. Their position is that the attributor goes one step further than just an internal/external distinction. He also tries to determine whether the cause was stable or unstable. In the case of internal attributions, the cause of poor performance may be lack of effort or lack of ability. Effort is seen as unstable--that is, it changes from time to time and task to task while ability is seen as an enduring characteristic. In the case of external attributions, the cause may be a task that is too difficult or factors beyond anyone's control (e.g., bad luck, a computer failure). Bad luck is an unstable factor while a difficult task would be a stable one. This analysis, together with what has been presented thus far leads to the following model:



	Internal	External		Internal	External
Stable	Sufficient Ability	Easy Task	Stable	Lack of Ability	Difficult Task
Unstable	Sufficient Effort	Good Luck	Unstable	Lack of Effort	Bad Luck

Observational bias. Besides increasing our understanding of the inference process, the attributional research also revealed another important point: People make systematic errors in inferences about the causes of behavior. While numerous examples are available, two biases seem most relevant here. First, there is an actor/observer distinction (Jones & Nisbett, 1971). When making attributions about other people's behavior, one tends to utilize internal causes. In contrast, when accounting for one's own behavior, one tends to attribute actions to external demands. As an actor, the environment is the central focus, while as an observer the focus is upon the behavior of the other person and the underlying, internal, causes of that behavior. This difference in focus leads us to believe that the environment is the cause of our own behavior while the behavior of others is caused by their personal characteristics. This inference is often incorrect.

A second bias which is closely related to the actor/observer distinction is called "defensive attributions" (Shaver, 1970). This bias suggests that one is likely to attribute one's successes to personal factors and one's failures to environmental factors. People see their successes as caused by their abilities while their failures are caused by factors over which they have no control. However, when judging others observers are relatively more likely to attribute failures to internal personal causes and successes to external environmental causes. These biases are partly explained by the fact that the observer does not have access to the actor's perception and understanding of the environment. All the observer sees is the behavior and its effects. Nevertheless, these findings suggest that leaders frequently will make errors in their attributions and that these errors may influence their actions.

A Proposed Attributional Model of Leadership

Given all of this background, we have developed an initial model of the evaluation process in the leadership context. This model is presented in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The process begins when the leader observes an example of what he judges to be poor performance. This may be a missed deadline, a failure to follow instructions, absenteeism, or low output. In some cases, either the organization or the supervisor may have a pre-established policy for handling the problem. Perhaps one unexcused absence a month goes unmentioned, two requires a reprimand, and three results in a reduction in pay. Under circumstances in which such a policy already exists, little, if any attributional work will go on.

When policies do not exist, attributions about the causes of the poor performance are made and this process is labeled "link #1" in the model. At this point, we see three sets of variables influencing the attribution that is made: informational factors, social factors, and biases.

The informational factors include the content characteristics suggested by Kelley: distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus. We have already discussed the impact of these variables on the attributional process.

Some social factors also appear to be important. That is, some dimensions of the leader-subordinate relationship affect the attribution. For example, the more similar the leader is to the subordinate the more likely the leader is to attribute the causes of poor performance to external

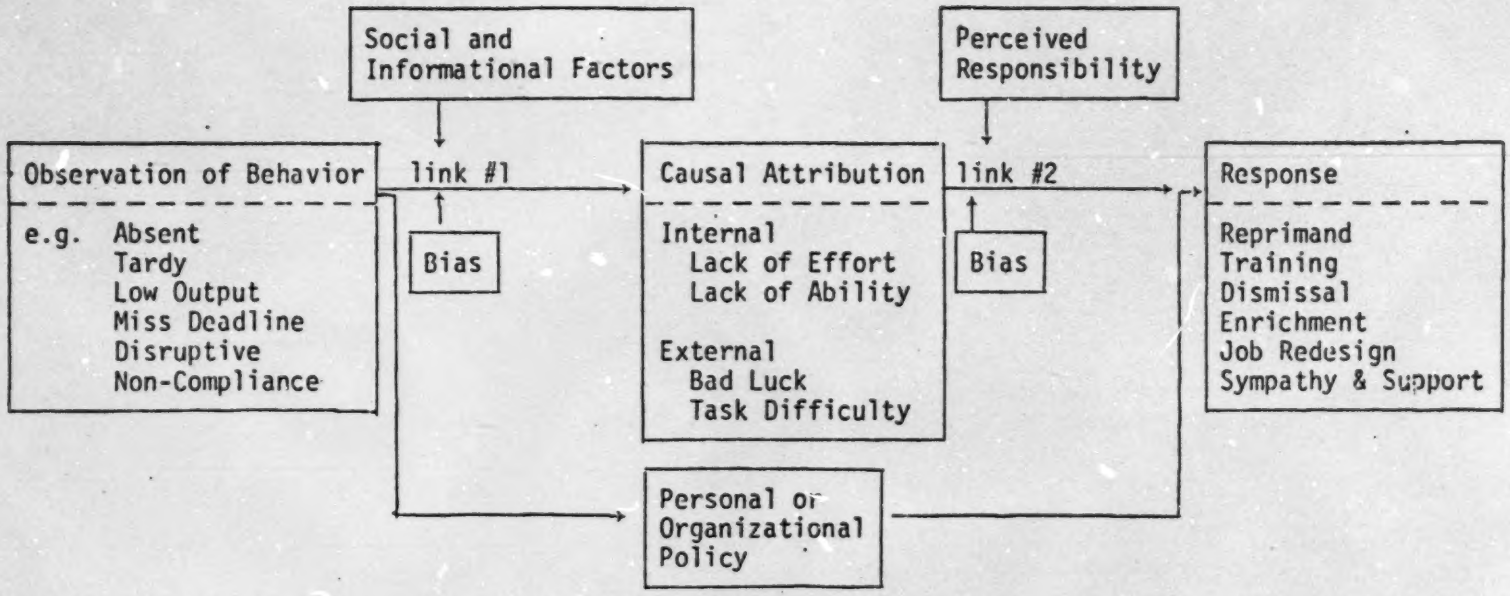


Figure 1. An attributional model of a leader's response to a subordinate's poor performance.

factors, just as he would do for himself (Jones & Nisbett, 1971). Similar results can be expected when the leader has had a great deal of experience with the subordinate's job. In both cases, the leader's experience or empathy will increase the chances that he can see the situation from the subordinate's perspective and therefore infer an external cause.

On the other hand, when the subordinate's poor performance reflects upon the leader, the leader is likely to attribute the poor performance to internal causes. The same should be true with increasing power for the leader. What we are suggesting is that if the subordinate's poor performance was seen as caused by external factors (e.g. supervision) it might place blame on the supervisor. Therefore, it is more likely that the supervisor will attribute the poor performance to internal characteristics of the subordinate than to external environmental factors. Thus, the leader's involvement in the relationship will affect his attributions.

Aspects of the task also are important. Any factor that increases the judgment that effort is high will lead to an ability attribution when poor performance occurs. For example, when social pressure is intense, supervision is close, or the financial rewards are high, we would expect someone to try to do well. If they fail, we are likely to attribute that failure to a lack of ability (keeping in mind the observer's general bias to infer internal causes of another person's poor performance).

The more general actor/observer and defensive attributional biases also influence this link. They make it much more likely that a subordinate's poor performance will be attributed to a lack of effort or ability than to external events. Thus, information, social and task factors will all contribute to the attribution that is made.

Once the attribution is made, the next step is to analyze what the leader does about it. This process appears as "link #2" in Figure 1. In general, we believe that the internal/external and stable/unstable distinctions will be important for understanding the course of action and the severity of the action taken by the leader. If lack of effort is seen as the cause, then a reprimand or some other motivational strategy is likely to be used. If ability is the perceived cause, then training or transfers might occur. If the task is perceived as the problem, then perhaps job redesign or enrichment might be tried and if bad luck is the attribution then perhaps sympathy and support will be in order. So, it appears to us that particular attributions will correspond fairly directly to particular actions on the part of the supervisor.

Some factors probably moderate this relationship. First, the leader's perception of the degree to which the subordinate is intentionally or personally responsible for the action will probably affect the extremity of the supervisor's corrective action. For example, a subordinate might fail to exert effort because (a) he was sick (low responsibility) or (b) he didn't care (high responsibility). Similar distinctions can be made for ability. Somehow a subordinate is seen as responsible for some personal trait such as being too assertive but not responsible for his lack of intellectual skill. It is likely that more extreme actions will follow subordinate actions for which the leader believes he is responsible.

Finally, we suspect that there are biases in this second link as well. We merely "suspect" this because there is less literature available to substantiate our arguments than there is for the actor/observer and defensive attributional biases. One bias that is readily apparent is that observers

have difficulty separating an actor's behavior from its effects. For example, a supervisor is more likely to utilize extreme corrective action if a subordinate failure to meet a deadline results in a million dollar contract loss rather than a one hundred dollar loss. Thus, the result of the behavior is likely to bias the extremity of the response even though the behavior and the attribution are the same. It is not yet clear to us if judgments about (a) the responsibility for the action and (b) the effects of behavior have their effects upon attributional uncertainty and thus on the zeal with which the supervisor takes corrective action or merely upon the extremity of the corrective action itself. This will be a point for research.

A second suspected bias is that leaders see some things as easier to change than others. In general, people's behavior is seen as more changeable than the environment. And, within the internal category, effort is seen as more easily changed than traits or abilities. The reason for this bias is twofold. First, just about everyone sees themselves as experts on human behavior. On the surface, understanding behavior and changing it seems rather simple: just tell the person how to behave. On the other hand, the environment is seen as less flexible and until recently (e.g., the work of Hackman and Oldham, 1976) we have had little research on ways to design and enrich organizational tasks.

All of this leads us to the final conclusions: Leaders are likely to attribute the causes of subordinate failure to internal motivational causes. They are therefore likely to use reprimands and dismissals as the responses to poor performance. Our analyses, if correct, would suggest that these inferences and responses are frequently in error. It is our contention that

leaders can correct their errors and increase the appropriateness of their responses by a better understanding of the attributional process.

Discussion

We feel that the proposed model can be a valuable addition to our understanding of the leadership process in two main ways. First, information processing explanations of behavior in general, and attributional analyses in particular are dominating the field of social psychology. Many researchers feel that this type of approach has dramatically increased our understanding of the causes of behavior.

However, little of this research has been generalized to the area of organizational behavior. The most recent review of organizational behavior in the Annual Review of Psychology (Mitchell, in press) discusses the areas in which attributional ideas have been applied and points out their positive utility. Thus, the use of an attributional analysis of leadership is likely to increase our understanding of the evaluation process and the effectiveness with which this process is conducted.

A second area of relevant research is the literature on leadership itself. The major emphasis of the research over the past 20 years has been on the effects of leader behavior, not on its causes. Only recently has a shift in this focus been apparent (Mitchell, in press). The research by Graen (1976), Hollander (1978), and Hunt and Osborn (1978) best represent this shift. An examination of the causes of why leaders respond the way they do to poor performance seems long overdue.

And the model has relevance for practice as well. First, dealing with poor performance is an unpleasant part of any supervisor's job. Few people enjoy giving reprimands, negative feedback, and being generally seen as

"the heavy." Besides, most people want to be liked by their subordinates and giving negative feedback may be seen as a hindrance to the development of these relationships. It would appear logical that helping people to understand the attribution and response process would decrease their negative feelings about the activity, and perhaps more attention would be directed towards doing it well.

But a second and more important point is that people not only don't like dealing with poor performance, most supervisors don't do it very well. Lots of biases enter in and their awareness of these biases is limited at best. Based on our model, supervisors will tend to err in their overuse of internal attributions and personal negative sanctions. The inaccuracies of the attributions and the responses tend to perpetuate the negative feelings surrounding the task, and also tend to be ineffective in increasing subordinate performance.

Therefore, it seems to us that a thorough understanding of the attributional process, and its effects on behavior will be helpful for leaders on both a personal and professional level. They will find the task of responding to poor performance less onerous and they will do better at it.

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